



Bikes of the year

Touring bike...

We've tried out an assortment of 700c and 26in tourers in 2005, aimed at both exotic locales and destinations closer to home. And those that have made it to the podium have one thing in common: steel. This is a material that's renowned for its sweet ride, baggage handler-proof tubing and, in more extreme circumstances, repairability in the field. As a result, it remains our preferred tubeset for fully laden touring.

There were some especially interesting contenders this year: Kona's Sutra (C+172, £1,100 ☎ 0117 982 3673, www.konaworld.co.uk) introduced mechanical Avid disc brakes into the equation, and with them the option of running either 26in or 700c wheels; Ridgeback's World Panorama (C+172, £900, www.ridgeback.co.uk) proved impressive value for money, and Edinburgh Co-op's Cosmos (C+173, £499 ☎ 0131 228 3565, www.edinburghbicycle.com), is a great introduction to the world of touring, with a quality that transcends its entry-level price thanks to a superb Reynolds 631 tubeset. The only setback is the fact that stocks have run out and it's no longer being made...

So they were the bikes that nearly got medals, but what about the serious contenders. Well, bronze goes to a bike from the other side of the pond. Surly's Long Haul Trucker (C+172 ☎ 01223 213800, www.surlybikes.com) caught our eye with its utilitarian cool and no-nonsense build quality. Inspired by the old-school tourers of the '70s, it's a bike

that doesn't pull any punches, with a reliable (if a little weighty) crommo tubeset, long wheelbase geometry and all the relevant braze ons – the spoke carrier on the chainstay is a nice touch. There's bags of tyre clearance and in a nod to the fact that older, chunkier parts are often more reliable than the latest newfangled finishing kit, standard issue diameters mean building it up from your spares bin is even easier.

The Long Haul Trucker was pipped to silver by Hewitt's first foray into the 26in market (C+167, £999 ☎ 01772 424773, www.hewittcycles.co.uk) – incidentally, this is the size we'd recommend for far-flung travels, thanks to its inherent strength and worldwide availability. In usual Hewitt style, the Cheviot's meticulous attention to detail, Reynolds' 631 tubeset and quality wheelbuild shone through. If we could level one criticism, we would have liked greater clearance for the roughstuff tourer's favourite rubber, Schwalbe's Marathon XRs.

It wasn't easy dragging Simon Withers away from the Dave Yates Wayfarer (C+176, £999 ☎ 01526 343322, www.daveyatescycles.co.uk), which is proof in itself that we had a great bike on our hands. Simon's has clocked up over a thousand miles (and still counting) across a broad spectrum of conditions, and it's still running as flawlessly as ever. The real clincher is the price: £470 for a handbuilt frame and fork (or just an extra £100 for the fully custom option) is fantastic value for money, and earns it this year's gold accolade.

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My pick of the year

Cass Gilbert

I was particularly struck by Surly's Long Haul Trucker frameset. Harking back to the golden era of the Seventies tourer, it's a handsomely understated yet solid set of pipes, with Surly's usual down-to-earth attitude. Kona's uber cool Sutra was one of the best handling tourers I've ridden in a while. It's just a shame that the position of its rack mounts is flawed for heavier loads, though the 2006 model gets low rider front mounts.

If fettling with gears is not your thing, then Thorn's Raven Enduro is simply ideal for UK winter mountain biking. For my own travels, I've been running a Rohloff Speedhub for a good 5,000 miles and can vouch for its superb build quality, ease of use and all but faff-free running.

LA Cycles' Lee Cooper is a classic custom audax bike at a great price. I took it to Donegal where it dealt with fast and light touring duties impeccably.

Lastly, since riding this month's gorgeous Ganssari, I've been reawakened to the simple pleasures of the fixed wheel. This baby is super smooth and serene, and for the winter commute there's simply no other way.



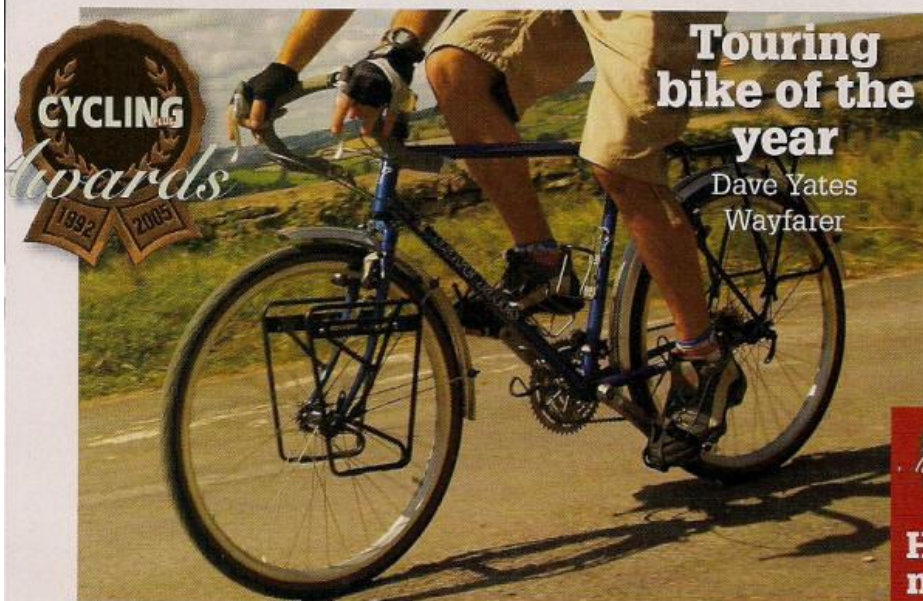
Touring bike silver award

Hewitt Cheviot



Bronze award

Surly's Long Haul Trucker



Touring bike of the year

Dave Yates Wayfarer



Honourable mentions

Ridgeback Panoram